

UNDER THE MARULA TREE

Writings from the
edge of the Kalahari

James Gardener

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Photographs in this collection were taken variously by Amanda Brown, Campbell Jenkins and James Gardener

For Ben who is in all my stories

Foreword

In January 1991 my wife and I both moved to Molepolole village and lived there for four years. During this time we got married, taught at several different institutions and grew to love our harsh but richly nuanced and wonderfully resilient environment at the edge of the Kalahari Desert. I was still in self-imposed exile from a South Africa gripped by the constitutional death throes of apartheid. The Kalahari offered me solace, reflection and time and space in which to write the short pieces collected here.

Molepolole village itself is a sprawling collection of Batswana family wards fifty kilometres north-west of Gaborone. About sixty thousand people think of 'Moleps' as their home village and it is sometimes described in the guidebooks as one of the largest vernacular settlements in sub-Saharan Africa. It is the traditional seat of the Bakwena clan, one of the seven loosely federated, cattle-owning, Setswana-speaking communities that make up the modern Republic of Botswana. It was a place that was experiencing a period of diamond-fuelled prosperity and associated growth pains in the years we came to think of it as home.

In a June 1992 edition of 'The Midweek Sun', a Gaborone newspaper, the following letter appeared penned by an obviously indignant expatriate newly arrived in Molepolole and clearly a staunch defender of its rustic charms. The offending article in the previous week's edition was written by Sandy Grant, a well-known and respected Mochudi writer living in Mochudi. Grant had been rather scathing about the appearance of Molepolole, a rival village.



The Editor
The Midweek Sun
Gaborone

Date: 24 June 1992

Sir

I find Sandy Grant's 'Etcetera Etcetera' column refreshing and thought-provoking. However, I have some reservations about his June 17th dismissal of Molepolole's buildings and architecture.

Over and above the four sites he correctly identifies as having "either character or quality", the village boasts four new Community Junior Secondary School sites; the most recent of which is strikingly situated on a hill with a commanding view of the village itself. From this vantage point, a dozen whitewashed churches are visible amongst a complex network of tracks, wards and small kraals. On an adjacent hill the Chiefs' Graves' site has an elegance and dignity all of its own. Down in the village there are dozens of large and small bars (far outnumbering the churches) which lack nothing for character. Along the main road there are no fewer than four state-of-the-art service stations all refurbished this year as a result of furious rivalry between the oil companies.

Molepolole's collection of traditional 'dry-stone' slate walls are often likened, by European visitors, to similar Irish or Cornish structures. Even the apparent "functionalism" of the College of Education hides a series of pleasant, shady courtyards and 'cloisters'.

At the Lethlakeng turn-off a brave new mosque in warm face-brick is rising directly opposite the splendid missionary gothic of the UCCSA church. Not far from the rightly admired Anne Stine Cultural Centre are several deep-verandahed trading store buildings dating from the Protectorate era. The Kwaneng Regional Development Authority compound, opposite the Mafenya-Tlala Hotel is a similar set of sturdy, thatched buildings to those of the hotel. And then of course there is the longest 'bottle-brick' wall in Southern Africa constructed entirely of non-returnable beer bottles!

Molepolole's highways and byways repay a little more investigation than your columnist has allowed himself,

Yours faithfully

J.B.GARDENER P.B. 008 MOLEPOLOLE

These writings are arranged roughly in the order in which they came to me and more accurately in the order in which the trigger incidents in each one actually took place. My early encounter with Brenda in her hair salon served as a village initiation ceremony in its own right.

HAIR TODAY, GOAT TOMORROW

I suppose I have always wanted to own a goat. This is how it happened.

I arrived in Molepolole at the beginning of a new school year and tried to sort out my affairs as quickly as possible in the January heat of the Kalahari. First on my list, above such matters as a post office savings account and a paraffin fridge, was a haircut. There is something ticklishly obsessive about needing to get the hair out of the eyes and off the back of the neck in that sort of insistent heat. As things turned out, I should perhaps have proceeded more slowly.

Now in fact, Molepolole is not all that remote, as Batswana villages go. Gaborone, with its international hotels, high-rise offices and air-conditioned hair salons, is only fifty kilometres away. However, I was determined to get to know my new haunts, to 'buy local' and to avoid frequent, expensive trips into the capital. Also I was in a hurry and had spotted a hand-painted signpost pointing off the main road advertising, "BRENDAS' HAIR SALOON". It sounded intriguing as well as providing me with a ready text for my first language lesson of the new term at the College of Education.

I followed a sandy track off the main road and approached a building with a corrugated-iron roof. It was distinguished from

other similar buildings along the track by being painted bright turquoise. A large, dirty-red and drab-white hen was startled by my brisk approach across the freshly swept yard. I knocked tentatively on the half-open door and took a step into the delicious cool inside. As my eyes adjusted to the light, I became aware of quite what an astonishing place I had discovered.

A full length mirror directly opposite the door both reflected and absorbed some of the sweltering heat from the yard. In one corner stood a pair of bulbous hair-drying head sets on long poles, glowering at me like giant marabou storks. One wall was given over to a row of cracked and dusty hand basins wishfully awaiting the fulfilment of some plumber's glib promise. The most arresting piece of furniture in the room was a massive, red leather and shiny chrome chair which stood in swivel-based, high-backed splendour right in the middle of the floor. Quite definitely an early 1950's art deco dentist's chair, right down to its ribbed, white porcelain instrument tray; in a hair salon; in Molepolole.

Brenda (as I assumed) swivelled around in her magnificent seat to welcome me. She was immense. If she was at all surprised to see a 'lekgoa' at her door, she did not show it.

"Dumela rra," she wheezed at me from her semi-reclining state. I was irresistibly reminded of one of Asterix's more corpulent Roman emperors – Shavius Maximus perhaps. Or even a potential Bond villain – the Barber of the Kalahari?

"Dumela mma, ke tsogile," I managed in stilted phrase-book reply; and, gaining in communicative confidence, "Ke kopa haircut?"

This last remark galvanized the lady proprietress into quite unseemly haste. She heaved herself out of her damp chair and

ordered me to take her place. Before I could suggest a little wash and brush-up, she had lassoed me with a blue-checked dishcloth and pointed to a faded cardboard poster displayed on the wall above the hand basins. It announced lopsidedly:

HAIRSCUT.....15 pula

PERMING.....from 20 pula

EXTENSIONS...100 pula (all day)

FIREWOODS.....50 thebe each

I queried the steep price of a haircut, in what I hoped was a friendly tone; and was told that the prices were the same as in Gaborone and that I could go there and check for myself if I wanted to spend the bus fare. I bit back any smart remarks, settled into the erstwhile dentist's chair and began to read the other posters on display. Advertisements for 'WellaStrate' and 'Soft 'n Easy Curl Activators' clung to each other; Michael Jackson's pallid features seemed to be everywhere. A yellowing newspaper clipping proclaiming a new wonder diet clung to a cork notice board. Without warning, Brenda attacked me with a pair of scissors. A blunt pair of scissors.

I must have reacted rather more sharply than Brenda had trained her regular clients to do. My head was jerked back into an upright position and the attack upon it vigorously pursued. Great gouts of hair flew past my ears and landed in my lap. The relief of having it off my neck was rapidly replaced with concern for my ears themselves not to mention the spectre of unsolicited baldness. I looked around suspiciously for a Kojak poster. Only Michael Jackson stared at me wanly. Timidly, I requested a time-out from my tormentor. Brenda seemed to take this as applause in appreciation of her efforts and smiled gap-toothed from behind her large, dull grey scissors. My line of

vision to the mirror was completely barred by a vast expanse of wrap-around skirt in alternate swirls of red, yellow and green. I felt decidedly light-headed.

Relax. These things have a way of working themselves out. Don't show your complete lack of confidence in the lady for fear of undermining her or even – horrendous thought – provoking her anger. However, Brenda's confidence seemed rock solid. She ploughed on relentlessly through my – admittedly luxuriant – thatch until the scissors finally snapped shut and hung limply at her side. I struggled to my feet weakly. My full-length mirror image confronted me in uncompromising detail. It confirmed my worst fears and my least generous assessment of Brenda's familiarity with the subtleties of cutting 'lekgoa' hair. It was a disaster. It would have brought instant dishonourable discharges from the Marines for both barber and victim. Deranged tufts stood out everywhere from my freshly gouged scalp.

In a moment I turned from newly-arrived, laid-back tolerance to towering consumer rage. I must have given a fair impression of a badly tonsured monk exorcising a demon. Brenda, more surprisingly, turned from grinning, scissor-wielding ogre to blubbery wreck. Suddenly the room was full of people. Unseen eyes had obviously been watching the command performance from the wings. The situation had all the makings of a crisis. One of the spectators was a young girl carrying a small goat in her arms. I looked for a diversion to cover my awkward confusion.

“Phokwana!” I exclaimed and pointed to the baby goat, displaying an impressive but altogether misleading knowledge of the Setswana diminutive. The effect on the tearful Brenda was mollifying if startling. She grabbed the unsuspecting goat from the child's arms and thrust it effusively into mine.

“The goat, it is yours. Sorry for the haircut,” she sniffed in plaintive tones of apology.

“I owe you fifteen pula.” I managed a reconciliatory smile and tendered two ten pula notes.

“No change,” came the stolid, automatic reply, eyes lowered.

“Keep it. For the goat.” I sighed ruefully, thinking of the hot trip into Gaborone and the luxury of a shampooed cut and shave in the Sheraton Hotel.

The goat nuzzled at my newly exposed neck. I had already christened it ‘Brenda’.

